

Founding Fathers Found in Torrance



Michael DeBartolo as John Dickinson and Evan Cooper as John Adams. Photo by John Nolan

John Adams, rock star

The Aerospace Players fly high with “1776”

by Bondo Wyszpolski

Okay, there were some tech issues and so forth on opening night, but the large and mostly amateur cast that staged the musical “1776” pulled it off. And quite well, actually.

We’re talking about the 1969 work with music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards and a book by Peter Stone that at the end of the season walked away with three Tony Awards, including one for Best Musical.

This production by the Aerospace Players is hardly Broadway caliber, but we only need a few of the almost 30 actors to really stand out, and fortunately the lead actor, Evan Cooper, in the role of John Adams, is truly convincing. I’m not going to tell you he’s excellent, but he’s very, very good. And that’s important because, essentially, “1776” is his story.

The musical is set in the spring and early summer of 1776 when delegates from the thirteen colonies have gathered to create a Declaration of Independence that will proclaim their separation from England as the United States of America. In order to get them all to sign their

names on it, each of them has to agree to the precise wording. In many ways, this is like the play “Twelve Angry Men.”

As in that volatile work, tempers flare and arguments are flung back and forth like hot potatoes. We know that Thomas Jefferson is credited with writing the document, but as we see it here he was prodded by Adams, and to some extent Benjamin Franklin as well. Jefferson (played by Charles Keppler) was really more interested in making love to his wife, Martha (Isabella Francisco). There’s a bit of comic relief here when these four characters intermingle.

There are, so to speak, heroes and villains. While Franklin (Bob Minnichelli) is portrayed as a sort of respected but slightly bumbling sidekick to Adams, John Dickinson (Michael DeBartolo) and Edward Rutledge (Bobby Borich) are the foils that fight on until the bitter end, and in some ways “1776” is like a boxing match that goes the full 12 or 15 rounds.

Rutledge, in fact, in a last-ditch effort to twist the phrasing so it benefits the slaveholding states (he represents South Carolina), performs an almost demonic number called “Molasses to Rum.” It’s also a bit overboiled in that, on occasion, the orchestra drowns out the performances. For example, when John Adams and his wife, Abigail (Erin Callaway), have a quiet and heartfelt conversation, one needs to strain to hear what they’re saying. Presumably someone took note of this and let’s hope the instrumentalists are more constrained this coming weekend.



John Dickinson and the Conservatives of “1776” performing “Cool, Cool, Considerate Men.” Photo by John Nolan

If “Molasses to Rum” is on the manic side, “Momma Look Sharp” is rather touching, sung fetchingly by Nik Corzine as the Courier, who up until that moment seems rather buffoonish. So it’s a pleasant surprise. Also providing comic relief is Lawrence Moreno as Andrew

McNair, Custodian and Bell Ringer, who becomes exasperated by being ordered to open the window one moment and to close it the next.

Which is to say that, despite the gravitas of the moment, there are some light touches here that help propel the narrative. We know how it ends, of course. The Declaration is finalized, somewhat flattened by words and phrases that had to be deleted in order for everyone to sign off on it, but in the end it turned out to be the best that was possible at the time. Besides, the thing still seems to hold water today, doesn't it? This moment in our history was both solemn and risky. The men were fully aware that they had to hang together... or they would certainly hang separately.

Well, we can't list everyone, but Chuck Gustafson is the director and producer, with assistant directors John Woodcock and Andrew Dawdy (Dawdy and his wife Kelley are also credited with properties); Rick Heckman the musical director; Steve Norris did the sets and the lighting design; painting by Robin Wohlman; tech direction by Tammy Choy; hair and makeup by Susane Button; and choreography by Jeannine Barba.

I heartily suggest seeing this production in lieu of the touring production that's coming to the Ahmanson Theatre in April. That's the one with the color-blind all-female cast that seems terribly misguided, based on reviews and what's available on YouTube. Audience members who've seen it leave scathing remarks. So, that said, the current show at least gives us what the creators of the musical intended, with no monkeying around.